

Myra Colby Bradwell: Women's Rights Activist

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A lot of people talk about 'the power of one' and there is no better example of the power of one than Myra Colby Bradwell. Myra helped women in numerous ways, but the most memorable battle was her fight for women's right to be lawyers. How did her fight make a difference in Illinois history?

Myra Colby was born in Manchester, Vermont, on February 12, 1831. In 1843 her family moved to Elgin, Illinois. When she was young, she was very independent and spirited. Since her parents were involved in the abolitionist cause, they valued education and encouraged her to fight for what she thought was right.

After she returned from school in Kenosha, Wisconsin, she was considered the most eligible young lady in Elgin. Her parents had hopes of her marrying into an affluent family. Their expectations were not met when Myra fell in love with James Bradwell, who had no social title. Myra and James seemed to be perfect for each other. Both were open-minded and independent. Much to her parents' dismay, Myra and James eloped to Chicago.

Soon after their marriage James studied for the Illinois bar exam and passed. He quickly earned an outstanding reputation as a lawyer. He was also elected a judge on the Cook County Probate court.

Myra enjoyed working along side James and developed a desire to become a lawyer. James was more than willing to help her on this journey. In her time period only

men were allowed to undertake such a task, but that did not hold Myra Colby Bradwell back.

Ever since Myra had started working with James, she noticed that new laws were being passed constantly and that it took a while for the news of new rulings to come west. Myra wanted to start a newspaper for lawyers that contained reports on law changes. During the 1860s women were not allowed to own property, including businesses. Everything women earned or purchased after their wedding belonged to their husbands. Myra wanted to own the business herself. Being Myra, she set out to do just that. She asked the state legislature for permission to own the business in her name. With lobbying efforts and business friends' influence, Myra was granted the right by the Illinois State Legislature to own the *Chicago Legal News* in her name. On October 3, 1868, the first copy of the *Chicago Legal News* was printed and distributed. It instantly became an important resource for lawyers.

Now that Myra owned her newspaper, she often used the *Legal News* to sway public opinion in the favor of causes she thought were just. Her management of the newspaper and fiery editorials won her the respect of lawyers and legislators across the country.

Myra had not given up on her dream to become a lawyer. On August 2, 1869, she took the Illinois state bar exam and passed with flying colors. If she was to become a lawyer, she needed to request a legal license from the Illinois Supreme Court. In 1870 the Illinois Supreme Court rejected her request on the soul reason of coverture. Coverture was a law that roughly stated that during marriage, a woman's actions were basically invalid.

Myra continued to fight for what she believed was right for the rest of her life. In 1892 Myra Bradwell became a member of the Illinois State Bar Association. She was diagnosed with cancer shortly after the 1893 Columbian Exposition. James, in a last gesture of affection for his beloved wife, wrote letters to the Illinois and U. S. Supreme Courts. In 1890 and 1892 Myra Bradwell received letters from both courts saying that they had granted her a license to practice law and made their decisions retroactive to 1869. This effectively made Myra Bradwell the first woman lawyer in the history of the United States.

In conclusion, Myra Colby Bradwell made a difference in history by setting an example for future generations. Because of her determination and perseverance, women learned that they could excel in traditional male occupations even though men considered them incapable of success. It may seem that it was James in the end who won Myra the right to practice law, but if Myra had not been as fiery and spirited, the courts would have never even considered giving her a license to practice law. The world would have been a very different place had it not been for Myra Colby Bradwell. [From M. Buckley, T. Kilen, J. Rosenberg, and R. Siedel, *Illinois Women*; Robert P. Howard, *Illinois*; S. Ware, *Forgotten Heroes*; and E. Wheaton, *Myra Bradwell*.]